

PANEL

I

THE IDEAS OF BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI IN THE THIRTIETH YEAR SINCE HIS DEATH AND THEIR PLACE IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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SAFÂ MÜRSEL
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In 1981, an end was put to my duties in West German Radio, Hessen-Saar State Radio, and The Voice of Germany Radio. The reasons put forward for this, according to the opinions of these broadcasting companies, was my being the "religious extremist spokesman of the Süleymancıs" and a member of the Islamic World Congress. I was able to endure these overwhelmingly difficult times through the lessons I had taken from the model life of Said Nursi Hazretleri. Later I learnt that this charge of being "Defender of the Süleymancıs" had been instigated by my fellow believers. The campaign started against me by my brothers was because of my policy of dialogue and opening up. In this way, they accused me of "treachery towards Islam" and wanted to anathematize me.

As I said, I am not a member of the Nur community. And I am not one of Said Nursi's students. Before everything, the reason Said Nursi forms a model personality is that I have in part experienced in my own life the periods and trials he experienced in his life. And before everything the fact that his students actualize his principles in their lives. I am not the student of the great Master from Nurs, but I am the friend of his students and I beseech Almighty God that this sincere friendship will remain thus precious for all eternity.

* * *

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Şükran Vahide was born in Lancashire, England, in 1949. In 1980 she graduated from the Persian Dept. of the School of Oriental Studies in Durham University, and in 1981 she became a Muslim after reading English translations of the Risale-i Nur. Now living in Turkey, Şükran Vahide writes and researches on the Risale-i Nur and its author, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, whose biography she has written. She has translated foremost Sözlür (The Words) and many parts of the Risale-i Nur into English. Her published works include:

1. Islam, The West, and the Risale-i Nur (1987).
2. The Author of the Risale-i Nur, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1992).
3. The Words (trans. 1993).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RISALE-I NUR FOR THE WEST

Man's desire to make sense of himself and the world in which he finds himself is fundamental to his nature and is his greatest need. It is the driving force of progress and is manifested particularly in this age. More than at any time, man in the modern age wants to know the why's and wherefore's of everything and to learn their purpose. And indeed, his efforts to uncover the workings of the universe have been rewarded by the astounding leaps forward made in every branch of science. In the West, however, where these developments have taken place, material progress has not been matched by progress in other areas; that is to say, although Western man has had this tremendous success in unravelling the mysteries of the material universe, his success has not been extended beyond this. Plunging further and further into matter, he has failed to find satisfactory answers to the most basic and most important questions of all. Questions like "Why does the universe exist? What is the purpose of everything? What is the purpose of life? What is man's purpose? Where does he come from, and where will go after death?" have remained unanswered. Thus, though the material needs of those in the West are met and the majority live in conditions of affluence, the most basic need remains unanswered, and indeed becomes more acute as science daily

displays more the astonishing order, unity, and harmony, and complexity of the universe, and its alleged purposelessness becomes more untenable.

The source of this inability to provide satisfactory answers for the most basic questions lies far back in the roots of Western civilization, which has as its inspiration 'man-made' philosophy as opposed to divinely revealed religion. As science developed in the West, it was seen as distinct and separate from religion. Science and religion were even considered to conflict with one another, as were 'the material' and 'the spiritual'. So too Western civilization has traditionally taken up a position opposed to the pure revelation of the Qur'an, the only uncorrupted revealed scripture that remains to man. However, what must be one of the most exciting and encouraging things for Muslims today is that, despite these denials of modern civilization, developments in science corroborate the statements of the Qur'an concerning the universe and the beings within it, rather than contradicting them. And more than that, this agreement increases the further science goes; the latest discoveries of physics point to the unity of being and acausality. That is to say, the science which the West claims as its own is proving the the revealed knowledge of the Qur'an to be true; the Qur'an, which, showing there is no conflict between science and religion, provides the answers for modern man.

As the final Book Almighty God has revealed to mankind, the Qur'an addresses all men in every age. It addresses particularly and directly each level and rank of mankind in every age, and their particular needs. As mentioned, the mark of the modern age is the spirit of enquiry, which, driving man to discover the wisdom and purpose of things, has led him to uncover the mysteries of the material universe to a degree which even now seems unbelievable. So too in every age Almighty God sends someone to renew His religion of Islam and relate the Qur'an's

message; a regenerator who makes known those aspects of the Qur'an which look to that age in particular. Thus, in this modern age such a renewer and regenerator is Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, the author of the Risale-i Nur, which, primarily pointing out the wisdom and purpose of things, relates and explains the Qur'anic message for contemporary man.

The Risale-i Nur is a true commentary on the Holy Qur'an, expounding those of its verses which are concerned with the truths of belief, written particularly to answer attacks made on them in the name of science. This it does in a way that addresses modern man's mentality, a mentality that has been permeated by 'scientific thinking', and so is uniquely fitted to convey the teachings of the Qur'an to Western man. For it examines the universe and the beings within it, but in so doing concludes that the only rational explanation for them is that they are the creatures, the evidences, of a Single Creator. It demonstrates that the very nature of the universe, its order, harmony, unity, the interdependence of its parts, excludes the possibility of all the various explanations put forward by philosophy and materialism, that the concepts of chance and coincidence, Nature, and causality are irrational and precluded. The Risale-i Nur proves that nothing, be it 'Nature', or the laws and forces of Nature, or causes, can have a hand in the creation of things, and become 'a partner to God'. What are known as the laws of Nature, which give the universe its order, have no external existence, they exist only as knowledge, they have no power. The order in the universe is the way the Divine Will is manifest, and 'the forces of Nature', manifestations of Divine Power.

Western man wants proof and evidence if he is to accept an idea. Thus, the Risale-i Nur sets forth all these matters as reasoned arguments; it puts forward a proposition, argues it with logical proofs, and comes to reasoned conclusions. An example

of this is the following, which is part of a proof of Divine Unity:

"If all things are not all together attributed to the Pre-Eternal All-Powerful One, the One Knowing of All Things, then as well as having to gather together in a particular measure from most of the varieties of beings in the world the body of the tiniest thing like a fly, the particles which work in that tiny fly's body will have to know the mysteries of the fly's creation and its perfect art in all its minutest details. For as all the intelligent agree, natural causes and physical causes cannot create out of nothing. In which case, if they do create, they will gather [the being] together. And since they will gather it together - whatever animate being it is, there are within it samples of most of the elements and most of the varieties of beings, for living creature are quite simply like a seed or essence of the universe, it will of course be necessary for them to gather together a seed from the whole tree and an animate being from the whole face of the earth sifting them through a fine sieve and measuring them with the most sensitive balance. And since natural causes are ignorant and lifeless, and have no knowledge with which to determine a plan, index, model, or programme according to which they can smelt and pour the particles which enter the immaterial mould [of the being in question], so they do not disperse and spoil its order, it is clear how far it is from possibility and reason to suppose that, without mould or measure, they can make the particles of the elements which flow like floods remain one on the other in the form of an orderly mass without dispersing, for everything has a single form and measure amid possibilities without calculation or count..."¹

In addition to proving these truths according to logic and

with reasoned arguments, the Risale-i Nur examines, 'reads', the universe looking at it through the eyes of science. Considered in the light of all the physical sciences, it demonstrates it to be the creation of a Single Creator and the manifestation of His Most Beautiful Names. It shows that in describing some aspect of the universe's functioning, each science makes known some aspect of the Creator. The source of each is one of the Divine Names; its development is the manifestation of that Name. Far from there being any contradiction, the sciences are a means to knowledge of God.

When looked at in this way, the cold, dark, meaningless world of philosophy makes way for a universe illumined with wisdom and purpose. The Risale-i Nur uses the analogy of the universe as a book, with the pages of the heavens and the earth and of the seasons, the lines of night and day, the words of the creatures on the earth, the letters of fruits, and dots of seeds. With many books contained in one page, whole pages contained in a word, and an index of the whole in a dot. This vast, interlinking, complex, unified, perfect book is written in this way so that each part of it, even the letters and dots, make known and loved its Author and Inscraper. World within world, it is a perfect indivisible whole, a unity, making known its Single Creator. The book addresses man; its aim is that he should read the book and its parts, and respond with universal worship, love, and thanks to this desire of its Author to make Himself known. So too most of the benefits and purposes of things look to man, he attains to that universal worship by uncovering, discovering the order in the book, and displaying the functioning of beings and the workings of the universe by means of science.

To explain this further, the Risale-i Nur also likens the universe to a tree, with the elements as its branches, plants as its leaves, animals as its flowers, and man as its fruit, with his

heart as its mirror-like seed. All the Divine Names are manifested within it. As its fruit, man with his comprehensive disposition has the potentiality also to manifest all the Names. His superiority over all creatures lies in this. By displaying the parts of the tree and the book, the sciences make known the Divine Names. And man also reflects them as his potentialities unfold. The aim of the universe is realized as man uncovers and recognizes all the Names manifested in the vast Divine works which bring all beings to perfection, and responds to them with love and worship. And so is man's ultimate aim realized, which is to attain to that worship through knowledge and progress. Isn't then the Risale-i Nur important for people in the West by thus explaining these exalted aims and purposes and instances of wisdom in the universe, and by pointing out the path of true progress through worship, showing them the way to save themselves from meaninglessness and the contradictions of misguidance?

As with the existence of God and Divine Unity, the Risale-i Nur proves the other main truths of belief through pointing out their evidences in the universe. It shows the way to gaining rational belief in such pillars of faith as the resurrection of the dead and the life of the Hereafter, prophethood and the revealed scriptures, the angels, and Divine Decree and Determining, sometimes known as fate and destiny. It shows that these matters can be understood and proved rationally. This is one reason the Risale-i Nur and its author have earned the name of Regenerator of Religion in the present age. And it is another reason the Risale-i Nur is particularly fitting to convey the truths of the Qur'an to Western man, who, deprived by Christianity of rational belief in these matters, thirsts for such explanations.

There is no question more pressing for man than that of life after death and eternal happiness. Since, inspired by the Qur'an, the Risale-i Nur has found a way to prove this rationally,

included here by way of illustration is Bediuzzaman's own explanation of the method followed. The work referred to is the Tenth Word, the Treatise on Resurrection and the Hereafter.

"Each [of the 'Twelve Truths' of which the main part of the work is composed] proves three things at the same time. Each proves both the existence of the Necessarily Existent One, and His Names and attributes, then it constructs the resurrection of the dead on these and proves that. Everyone from the most obdurate unbeliever to the most sincere believer can take his share from each Truth, because in each, the eye is turned towards beings, works. Each says: 'There are well-ordered acts in these, and a well-ordered act cannot be without an author. In which case they have an Author. And since those acts have been carried out with order and balance, their Author must be Wise and Just. Since He is Wise, He does nothing in vain. And since He acts with justice, He does not permit rights to be violated. There will therefore be a great gathering, a supreme tribunal.' The Truths have been tackled in this way. They are succinct, and thus prove the three things at once."²

Together with proving the main pillars of faith singly, Bediuzzaman also demonstrates in the Risale-i Nur that they are all interconnected and each is a proof of the others. Thus, by 'reading' the events and Divine works in the world around us and recognizing the Divine existence and Names and gaining certain belief in them, it is possible through observation, thought, and contemplation to gain certain and rational belief in resurrection and the life to come. How the universe becomes alive and meaningful when it is seen in this light! What better way is there to call Western man to belief in the Qur'an than showing him that if he 'reads' the universe, which he has anyway been trained to observe, in the way the Qur'an directs, it

becomes illuminated with meaning and purpose and becomes a means to gaining rational belief, thus saving him from a meaningless life overshadowed by the blackness of non-existence, death? Throughout the Risale-i Nur, Bediuzzaman explains how to 'read' the universe in this way, to read it as meaningful messages and letters from its Author, so that its readers constantly take lessons from the world around them and constantly increase in knowledge of their Maker and strengthen their belief and certainty in the fundamentals of faith.

To continue with the theme of resurrection and the Hereafter, the Risale-i Nur offers a coherent, rational, total view of existence, that is, this world and the next world, the worlds of the Unseen and the Manifest World, and sets man and his actions within it. This is a point of the greatest importance for Western man. For in the West, due to the influence of Materialist and Naturalist philosophy, which look to multiplicity, causes, and Nature, the view is focussed on this world and the life of this world; Western man is submerged in matter. And even those who turn to Christianity or other religions cannot extricate themselves from it. Its consequences are grievous for man, who by his nature is pained by transience and looks beyond the material to eternity.

The Risale-i Nur describes the world as having three faces. One looks to the Divine Names, and is a mirror reflecting their "embroideries". Transience, separation, and non-existence can find no place in this face; there is only renewal. The second face looks to the Hereafter and the worlds of eternity; it is like the seed-bed for them, and the tillage of Paradise. It produces enduring crops and fruits, serves eternity, makes transitory things immortal. There is no death and transience in this face either, rather, the manifestations of life and eternity. As for the third face, this looks to transient beings, that is, us. It is the beloved of the worldly who follow their lower instincts and the

place of trade and examination for the aware and the conscious. Thus, for those who for any reason do not see the first two faces, the world presents this painful and ugly third face, which tells only of transience, death, and separation.

In regard to the first two faces, they are seen in relation to their Creator; that is to say, they are seen beyond or behind the veil of causality and Nature. The constant change and flux in this world, which when seen in the view of the third face gives rise to transience and death, serves many profound purposes. Bediuzzaman describes the passage of beings like this:

“At its Sustainer’s command, the universe is in continuous motion. With Divine permission, all creatures are unceasingly flowing in the river of time. They are being sent from the World of the Unseen, being clothed with external existence in the Manifest World, and are then being poured in orderly fashion into the World of the Unseen, and it is there that they alight. And, at their Sustainer’s command, they continuously come from the future, stop by in passing pausing for a breath, and are poured into the past.”³

Thus, beings do not go to non-existence; they pass from the visible world to the unseen world. They have existence in the world of the unseen and Divine Knowledge; at the manifestation of Divine Power and Will, they are given external existence in this manifest world, where they are recorded, then they pass on to the sphere of Knowledge and the worlds of the Hereafter and the Unseen. This constant flood and passage of beings is being made from top to bottom with instances of wisdom, benefits, aims and purposes. The Risale-i Nur describes how the All-Wise Maker created the world in this way so that He might exhibit the endless embroideries of His Divine Names in a limited field and write infinite signs which point to infinite meanings on a small page. He created the face of the earth as an

arable field and prepared it in such a way that it would produce ever-fresh crops, so that He might sow and reap the numberless miracles of His Power and display endless gifts from the infinite treasury of His Mercy. And through the flood of beings, He grows in this small world vast quantities of crops suitable for the endless worlds of the Hereafter. So too He displays infinite Divine perfections and endless manifestations of His beauty and glory and countless Dominical glorifications in finite time and in a limited field.

As with other creatures, man’s deeds and actions pour into the ‘worlds of the Hereafter. This awesome fact Bediuzzaman explains like this:

“Heaven and Hell are the two fruits of the branches which stretch out from the tree of creation towards eternity. They are the two results of the chain-like universe. They are the two storehouses of this flood of events. They are the two pools of beings which flow tumbling towards eternity. They are two places of manifestation, the one of Divine Favour, the other of Divine Wrath. When the Hand of Power shakes up the universe with a violent motion, those two pools will fill up with the appropriate matters.”⁴

This brings us to a further important point about the Risale-i Nur, which is that it explains these profound matters in such a way that each person can understand them according to his level. Through the use of comparisons and allegories, it brings distant and vast truths close like a telescope. All the matters are illustrated with apt comparisons, examples, or stories, so that the reasoning and logic are easy to follow and the conclusions easy to grasp. Its whole tone is mild and persuasive, and with its flawless arguments, convinces utterly. It concerns truth and reality, and it rings true. For the West, where the religion of Islam is so misrepresented and misunderstood, there can be no more fitting means of conveying its truths. Anyone who comes

to know Islam and the Qur'an through the Risale-i Nur will come to love them.

In addition, the Risale-i Nur makes comparisons of religion and philosophy, belief and unbelief, guidance and misguidance, in many contexts and on many levels, and shows that in every case, truth and reality, as well as true benefit, happiness, and progress for man lie only in the former. Philosophy, in whatever form, cannot answer the fundamental questions it is in man's nature to ask and offer him true happiness. Restricting its view to this world, it drowns in matter, and condemns the world and man to meaninglessness and purposelessness. Thus, a work which points out the contradictions and irrationality of concepts such as Nature and causality by which philosophy attempts to explain existence, and demonstrates by pointing out the grand purposes and instances of wisdom in all things that the only rational explanation of the universe and man is that of Divine Unity, is certainly of the utmost importance for the people of the West. Indeed, as science progresses and man wakes up to the contradictions of Western philosophy, the importance of the Risale-i Nur, which bringing together science and religion, explains so appropriately the Qur'an's message of Divine Unity, will increase.

Footnotes:

1. Nursi, Bediuzzaman Said, *Lem'alar*, Istanbul 1986, 230.
2. —, *Barla Lahikası*, Istanbul 1960, 160.
3. —, *Mektûbât*, Istanbul 1981, 220.
4. —, *Sözler*, Istanbul 1980, 498-9.

* * *

The German orientalist Ursula Spuler's message to the Panel

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I offer my thanks for your kind invitation to join your Panel on 16th March 1991 organized on the occasion of the anniversary of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's death. I hope you and the Panel will meet with a good response, co-operation, and great success.

This century's great scholar Bediuzzaman Said Nursi has become famous outside Turkey. Known with the rank of *Üstad*, the Master, he demonstrated that it was not enough for contemporary Muslims to adhere only to their traditions. In the Risale-i Nur Collection, a commentary on the Holy Qur'an, he attached great importance to striving to interpret Islam, and considered that for scholars to be able to do this it was necessary for them to be aware of this.

Islam has to contain theologically the modern world view together with its complete structure. In this field, Islam's own structure and nature possess this ability. Said Nursi saw this and put forward its basic principles. This was his greatest success. And he developed clear models in the subject.

A most important matter in connection with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is his dealing with the question of Islamic education.